

# "Hmmm... this seems like the beginning of an *Approach* article"

by Lt. Paul Cannon

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**A**fter a successful, week-long, JO-run detachment to Tunisia, I was dash four in a division of Hornets flying back to the ship. It was great to have spent a week off of the carrier during the first month of cruise, and we were now flying back onto the ship two days before our first port visit. Not bad.

The plan was to fly from Tunisia to Souda Bay, Crete, top off with gas, then proceed to the ship, which was operating off the coast of Egypt. The flight plan had us landing at Souda Bay with just over 3,000 pounds and a VFR forecast. The flight was uneventful up to the point where we checked in with the Greek controller as we approached Souda Bay. We've all heard stories about foreign controllers with weak English skills, and this controller definitely fit the bill. He refused to respond to our request for the weather conditions at Souda Bay and

didn't clear us for any approach. Our division ended up flying directly over the field at 28,000 feet, trying to work through the language barrier. We had less gas than we had planned, and the weather seemed to be worse than forecast.

Eventually, we split up into sections and were cleared for GCAs. My section penetrated the clouds at 20,000 feet overhead the field in a steep spiraling descent. It took about 10 seconds for a major case of vertigo to set in. The clouds got thicker and thicker as we spiraled down, and I struggled to hang onto my lead's wing. Eventually his aircraft disappeared for a second, then came back, then disappeared, then came back. It was time to stop trying to hack it, level off, take a cut away, suck up my pride, and call lost sight.

I came inside the cockpit to regain my bearings, while letting my lead know what I was doing. The fact that I was in the clag with a



Photo-composite illustration by Allan Amen

clueless controller in mountainous terrain wasn't helping my blood pressure. Meanwhile, the other section of Hornets was somewhere behind us. My lead and I tried to explain to the controller that our section had separated and would need individual GCAs now, but his bucket was already overflowing, and he never quite understood what was happening. My lead called me on comm 2 and let me know he had broken out at 800 feet. I coordinated with the other section on comm 2, to make sure we weren't near each other. I flew to the course line on my HSI and gradually descended. Eventually I broke out at 800 feet, a few miles in front of the field, and came in for my own straight-in. I landed with more than 2,000 pounds of fuel, but the approach was anything but standard.

After calling the ship from base ops and letting them know we would be there in a few

hours, we manned up in driving rain. The ceiling had come down to about 300 feet, and water was standing on the runway. The weather was lousy, the controllers were weak, we were in mountainous terrain, and it was getting late in the day. On the taxiway, the division lead made the call: we were putting ourselves into a box. We cancelled the launch, proceeded to the line, and shut down. After getting out of our jets and talking about it, we agreed that the flight had been feeling more and more like the beginning of an *Approach* article. When we called the ship, our chain of command was glad to hear we had decided not to push it. They told us to enjoy our extra night ashore, which we did. The next day the weather was fine, and we made it to the ship just in time for our first port visit.

Not bad. 🦅

Lt. Cannon flies with VFA-86.